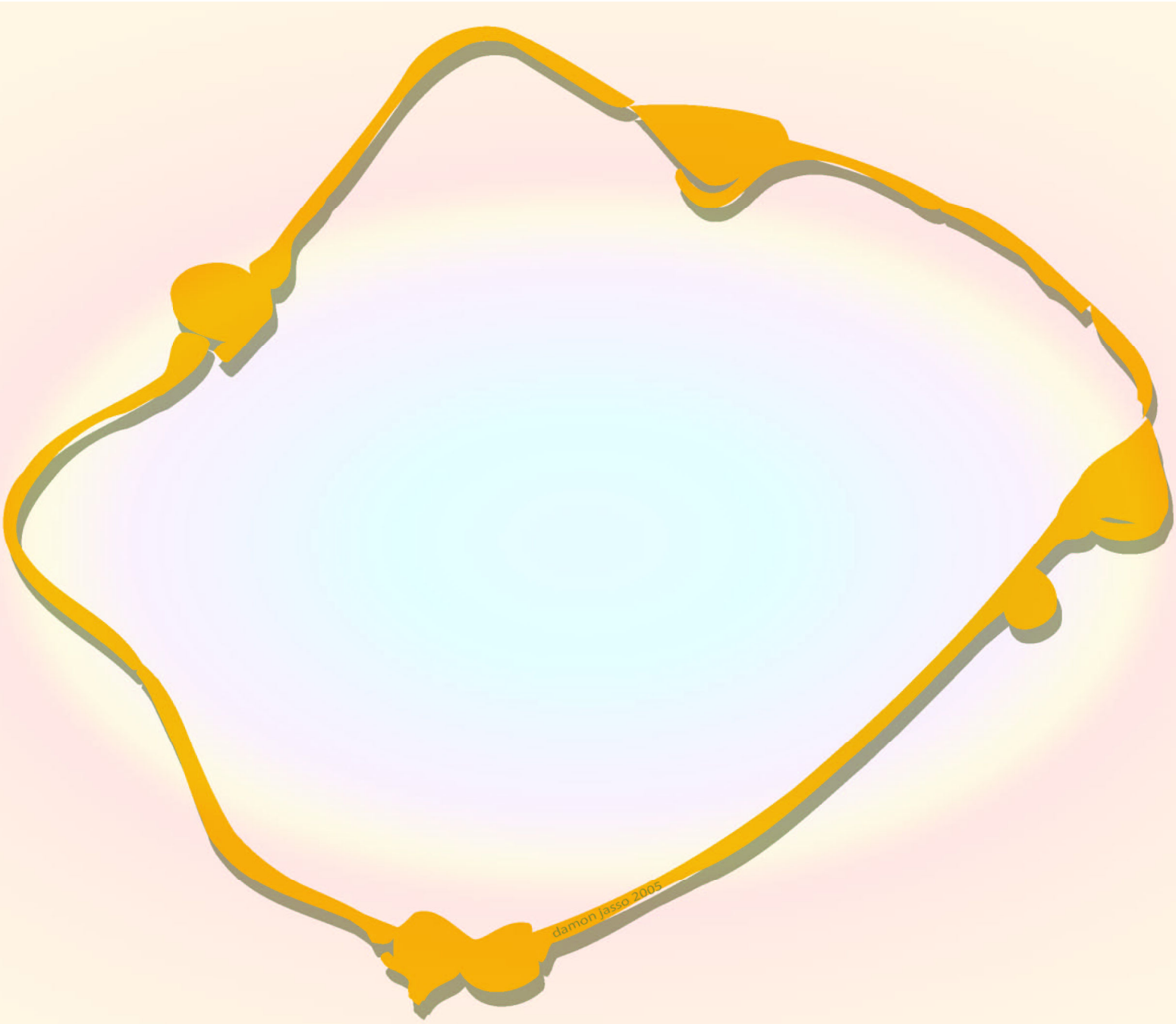
damon jasso 2005

"Let it go, Dad. Please," Shane said, scooting away from the pool of greasy brown liquid collecting around the debris clogged grate covering the drainage ditch.

"You kidding? That's your lucky.... Thingy.... Whatever it is. You can't just it drop into the sewer." Virgil waded into the gutter, run-off splashing over the tops of his size twelve work-boots. "Didn't Julie give it to you? Talk about bad mojo all the way around."

Shane continued backing away until he was at the passenger's side door of their truck. He watched as Virgil carefully approached the grate, slowly bent down, and snatched up a trinket from the slop that had collected there. Virgil wiped the thing down with both hands, flinging black muck away to reveal a carved wooden tortoise on a silver chain.

"There," Virgil said. "Good as new."

"Hope you like it," Shane replied. "It's yours now."

"What?" Virgil asked, walking to the truck.

"God!" Shane threw his arm over his nose and mouth. "Gross! You stink, man! I told you to leave it alone."

"Here," Virgil held it out, small drops of goop still dripping from the necklace.

"No way," Shane skedaddled to the driver's side. "That's yours, man. I don't want it."

"It's just a little dirt," Virgil went to the back wall of the L shaped strip mall where they'd just made a delivery. A pipe poked out from between two cinder-blocks. Virgil twisted the handle capping the faucet and an erratic stream of water spurted to the ground. Virgil put the trinket under the flow, twisting it about, rinsing it clean.

"Dad. Leave it. Let's go." Shane cracked the truck's door and put one foot on the runner.

A service entrance door opened and a young man wearing a server's vest and bow-tie stepped out, already cussing before his foot crossed the threshold, "You motherfucking assh - Oh, hey guys. What are you still doing here?"

"Hey Bobby," Virgil said. "Just cleaning up."

"Yeah, I heard the water running. Thought those skate-punks were back here draining the pipe. What you got there?"

"Hey Bobby," Shane said. "Tell that fool to drop that shit and get in the truck."

Bobby sat down on the threshold and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He lit one and took a pull.

"What is that shit?" Bobby asked. Virgil held the wooden tortoise for Bobby to inspect, but Shane interrupted before the restaurateur could lay hand on it..

"Whoa, Bobby, he just took that out of the sewer. You might want to think twice, my man."

Bobby snatched his hand back and asked, "What? That sewer?" he motioned to the clogged drainage ditch. "Over there?"

"Yeah," Shane stepped out of the truck, lipping a cigarette of his own. "That fucking sewer."

"It belongs to Shane," Virgil said. "He dropped it, I got it back for him."

"And you pulled it out of that sewer?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Jesus, man! Everybody dumps their shit down there. Oh. Oh. Oh, yeah," Bobby got up and moved away from Virgil. He stood next to Shane. "I smell it now. You're crazy, man."

"It's just dirt." Virgil went back to the water, rinsing his hands; his boots.

"Um. No. Not just dirt. See that gutter there? Yeah, that's coming right from our toilettes. And that one down there? Where all the black water is draining from? That's that Doctor's office. The gynecologists? You tell me; what would be coming out of a gynecologists' office that's all black and thick like that? Not just dirt, my friend."

Shane and Bobby took healthy drags from their cigarettes.

"What is it anyway?" Bobby asked.

"Some stupid necklace," Shane answered. "My girlfriend gave it too me."

Bobby shrugged.

"She probably got it from one of those claw machines," Shane continued. "Or Wal-Mart or something. Certainly not worth wading through shit for."

"It's just dirt, guys." Virgil turned off the pipe and shook his hands dry. "There is nothing new about this dirt. Whatever it is, I've seen it before; touched it before. I'm not afraid of dirt. I've lived long enough. I'm immune."

"Okay, Dad." Shane said. "Okay."

Virgil wiped the trinket off on his jeans and held it up by the chain.

"Oh, just throw it away," Shane said. "I'm not touching that thing now."

"Nothing wrong with it. It actually looks pretty neat."

"Yeah? Good. It's yours."

Bobby rested a hand on Shane's shoulder. "Why do you call Virg. Dad? He's younger than you are."

"No he isn't," Shane said, tapping his cigarette ash to the ground. "Anyway, that's what everybody around the warehouse calls him. Dad."

"Why?"

"Probably because he's always doing stuff like swimming in sewers to get people's necklaces. Probably."

"Look," Virgil approached, still holding the trinket, "you have to take this. Julie will be upset."

"No way, man," Shane held up his hands, waving Virgil away. "That shit is yours. Put it up and get in the truck."

"I'm driving," Virgil protested.

"Not anymore. I'm not having your contaminated paws on the steering wheel. I wish you could ride in the back, but I know they won't let us do that anymore. So. Passenger's side for you, Dad."

Virgil shook his head, tucked the tortoise in his pocket, and stepped around to the passenger's side.

Bobby and Shane finished their cigarettes then bumped fists.

"Alright boss."

"Alright."

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Driving back to the warehouse, Shane noticed a mark on Virgil's chin. A wet, bruised looking smudge clinging to the late-afternoon stubble of his co-worker's face. It was below his lip. Virgil could have licked it away with his tongue, had he wanted to.

It could be sewer water. It was probably sewer water. Shane kept glancing at it, disgusted.

Suddenly, Virgil started coughing violently. A hacking, body-racking series of coughs. Virgil held the back of his hand to his mouth to stifle the fit, with no success. This went on for a long time, then, finally, Virgil took a deep breath and threw his head back. The fit had passed.

Virgil looked at the back of his hand, grunted, then wiped it on his jeans.

"You okay?" Shane asked.

Virgil grunted again.

Shane glanced over. The smudge on Virgil's chin was gone now.

But there was a wet streak on the thigh of Virgil's jeans where he'd rubbed the back of his hand.

A bloody, mucosa wet streak.